



**Nurture corners in nurseries:
exploring perspectives on
nurture approaches
in preschool provision
in Glasgow**

 KEY POINTS

This briefing paper summarises the findings of qualitative primary research which explored parent/carer and practitioner perspectives on 'nurture' approaches to preschool provision in Glasgow City during the spring of 2014.

- There is a strong sense of enthusiasm for the nurture approach and satisfaction in the outcomes that it achieves for children.
- Children can be supported to overcome language and communication difficulties, develop appropriate social skills and begin to regulate their own behaviour and emotions. It is less clear whether the associated aim of supporting family engagement in learning is achieved.
- Some parents have been helped by nurture practitioners and experiences in the nurture corner to see their child in a more positive way and to become more aware of alternative ways of interacting with them. However, opportunities to engage with parents are limited and the influences of other circumstances may constrain the impact of this one intervention in family life.
- While there are some potential tensions and risks associated with the nurture approach, it can also offer an effective way of developing dispositions to learn and to bridge the gap between the learning culture of home and school.

INTRODUCTION

The evidence is compelling regarding the importance of early years' and childhood experiences for healthy development and for health and wellbeing throughout the life-course^{1,2}. It is widely agreed that consistent parental/carer love and care promotes healthy child development and attachment^{3,4}. There is also clear evidence that early experiences are directly influenced by economic, social and material circumstances; maternal physical and mental health; and family/household structure and function⁵.

The Scottish Government has made early years a key priority through successive strategies and policies culminating, most recently, in the Scottish Government's Early Years Collaborative (EYC) call for transformational change in the early years⁶. The EYC has challenged the public sector and its partners to utilise early years universal services to improve the quality and reach of services and to deliver needs-based, effective prevention and early intervention.

As part of this call for transformational change, the Scottish Government has set targets for Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) to achieve regarding babies', and children's developmental progress. One of these targets is that 90% of children should reach the milestones expected for their age and developmental stage on entry to primary school. As the lead agency within the Glasgow Community Planning Partnership responding to this particular target, Glasgow City Council Education Services and partners have extended their nurture and family learning approach from primary schools to the city's preschool provision. This initiative aims to support children who find it "difficult to play and learn with others" and to ensure that they can remain in and benefit from mainstream early years education. A nurture group aims 'to create the world of early childhood in school and so provide the broad learning experience normally gained in the first three years'⁷. Glasgow City Council Education Services Nurture Group Network characterises the nurture group experience as offering an effective short-term intervention to reduce the barriers to learning which social, emotional and behavioural difficulties create. The network has set out six guiding principles for nurture groups:

1. Children's learning is understood developmentally: opportunities are offered in response to children's assessed developmental progress rather than normalised expectations associating milestones or attainment levels with chronological age.
2. The nurture group provides a safe base: care is taken to ensure consistent routines and expectations, arrangements that minimise anxiety and experiences that relate to both domestic and educational settings.
3. Nurture is important for the development of self-esteem: there is a focus on shared activities and the valuing of individuals, responding to and praising all achievements.
4. Language is understood as a vital means of communication: children are supported to identify and describe their feelings in words rather than actions and to learn to communicate with others.

5. All behaviour is communication: the adults respond to children's behaviour as an expression of their social and emotional condition.
6. Transitions are significant in the lives of children: moving between home and the educational setting and different contexts in that setting are carefully managed for children in the nurture group.

Key features of nurture groups include: a separate room or space for the nurture group, referred to in this report as a 'nurture corner'; small group size; one or two trained adults; and integration of time spent in the nurture group and the playroom or classroom.

Children's needs and targets are identified by the 'Boxall Profile' which guides structured observations of children in the nursery or school setting, enables targeted intervention and is a means of measuring progress⁸.

The Glasgow Centre for Population Health (GCPH) is supporting Glasgow City Council Education Services to evaluate the impact of their nurture and family learning approaches on childhood development, family wellbeing and inequalities. As part of this evaluation, the GCPH collaborated with Education Services and partners to commission a qualitative research study, conducted in spring 2014 by an academic team from the University of Stirling, which explored parent/carer and practitioner perspectives on 'nurture' approaches to preschool provision in Glasgow City. This briefing paper summarises the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this research.

AIM

The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which parents/carers and practitioners experienced the nurture approach developed in preschool settings in Glasgow, and their perspectives on the impact that this provision has had on the wellbeing and development of young children and family engagement in learning. To complement these perspectives the views of health visitors and third sector professionals were also sought.

METHODS

The study was carried out in six Glasgow City nursery settings, distributed across the three geographical areas of the city. At each of the settings the researchers interviewed the head of the setting and two practitioners, one of whom was responsible for the nurture corner and the other working in the mainstream playroom. Focus groups or interviews were held with 11 parents to gauge their views about the value of nurture and family learning for themselves and their children.

KEY FINDINGS**Staff perspectives**

Nurture practitioners, playroom practitioners and managers saw the establishment of a nurture corner as consistent with the ethos of their setting and as a spur to making the whole nursery more focused on nurturing children. Small group size, a secure, calm space, consistent routines, a focus on individualised targets and warm interactions with an individual practitioner were the key features of nurture practice in nursery which emerged from the interviews and observations. The nurture corner experience was thought to be transformational for children who were uncommunicative and withdrawn and for those whose behaviour was over-boisterous and lacking in regulation. Benefits were not restricted to the nurture corner – a quieter main playroom was appreciated by all children and staff. These respondents saw value in having more than one nurture practitioner in the nursery and there was a clear recognition that having the right person leading the nurture corner was essential. There was a focus on fidelity to the nurture principles rather than innovation, although practitioners and managers at all settings had displayed creativity in establishing the nurture corner. In some places, novel forms of practice had developed from the existing nursery approaches. While there was recognition of the work of some individual health visitors and third sector agency staff there was no regular or sustained joint working.

Parent/carer perspectives

Parents talked about feeling welcomed by the nurture practitioners and being given good advice. They valued the special events arranged for them and the resource bags that allowed them to try out nurture activities and play games with their children at home. However, for parents, the biggest benefit of nurture provision was the positive impact that it had on their children. Even those who were initially anxious about the referral to nurture were rapidly impressed by the changes they noticed. Parents thought that the structure, consistency and empathy that their children experienced in the nurture corner increased their confidence, developed their communication and social skills, made them calmer at home and prepared them for the transition to primary school. There was a clear feeling among parents interviewed that all nurseries should offer nurture corners and that there should be more than one trained practitioner at each setting so that the benefits they recognised could be assured.

Health visitor and third sector perspectives

Health visitors who were interviewed reported having good links and positive working relationships with nurseries but they did not report any direct involvement with nurture corner activities. Some mentioned having contact with a nurture practitioner to discuss concerns regarding individual children and to share information but others were unaware of what a nurture approach involved and indicated that they would find it helpful to know more particularly in relation to supporting their role in assessing children, supporting parenting and in future joint working. One health visitor described the nurture approach as an alternative, perhaps less stigmatising option, for some families who find more structured parenting programmes less appropriate.

Third sector respondents who were interviewed also had limited experience of the principles and practices of nurture corners. Their focus tended to be on developing the skills of parents and the strength of relationships between parents and children. Nevertheless, they valued the small group size and consistency of nurture corners and the impact that they could have on children's communication skills, understanding of emotions and ways of engaging with their parents. They acknowledged the potential for experiencing appropriate models of interaction that spending time in the nurture corner offered parents and would value more opportunities for this. Indeed, third sector respondents were interested in extending their involvement in nurture provision.

Innovative practices

Establishing a nurture corner had called for the creative use of premises, resources and staff time. While adhering to established nurture principles was clearly important for practitioners, they had developed ways of engaging with parents that went beyond the typical nursery activities and some had incorporated additional resources and activities into their regular nurture routines. One setting had been innovative in extending the benefits of nurture provision to a few selected older children in primary school by offering them brief placements in the nurture corner to help with the younger children, supplemented by input from the nurture practitioner in their own classroom. Positive changes had resulted for the older pupils.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found a strong sense of enthusiasm for the nurture approach and satisfaction in the outcomes it achieves for children. These outcomes lie not in literacy, numeracy or other cognitive attainment areas but in overcoming aspects of behaviour and ways of engaging with families and educational settings that limit children's opportunities to learn and risk damage to themselves and others. It seems clear that, in the experience of parents and educators, time spent in a nurture corner can support children to overcome language and communication difficulties, develop appropriate social skills and begin to regulate their own behaviour and expressions of emotion.

Whether or not the associated aim of supporting family engagement in learning is achieved is less clear. Some parents have been helped by nurture practitioners and experiences in the nurture corner to enjoy engaging in activities with their children, to see their child in a more positive way and to be aware of alternative ways of interacting. Furthermore, as children who spend time in nurture corners begin to overcome their difficulties and frustrations they are likely to be more rewarding to be with at home too. However, opportunities to engage with parents are limited and the influences of other circumstances may constrain the impact of this one intervention in family life.

There is little obvious development of distinct 'nurture in nursery practices' other than the adoption, within the context of a preschool environment, of the established nurture principles, particularly the provision of a distinct nurture space with educational and domestic features and activities. The practices which can be observed are largely the development of typical preschool 'pedagogy' which supports learning through play using exploration, creativity and problem-solving rather than more traditional teaching practices. The small number of children engaging with the nurture practitioner does afford opportunities for more sustained and intensive relationships with the practitioner and the paring away of influences that might disturb or inhibit the child. Nurture provision can be more responsive to individuals and fine-tuned to developmental needs. Nurture practitioners are skilled at establishing relationships with children who may initially reject or resist engagement. It is also clear that talking is an important part of the practitioner's repertoire. They use talk to support language development, explore children's emotional states, structure social interactions and build self-esteem and confidence.

The advantages of a nurture approach in nursery settings seem evident but there are some potential tensions too. The managers and main playroom practitioners talked about the establishment of a nurture corner as raising awareness of the need for nurturing practice throughout the setting. However, current arrangements in nursery playrooms for three-to-five year olds may limit the extension of some nurture practices to the general playroom. In such circumstances the main playroom could be viewed as being in deficit.

A further potential tension is a result of the expectation that nurture practice should enhance family engagement in learning and improve parenting practices. The need for nurture practitioners to focus on the difficulties associated with nurturing challenging children in their care, especially when they work alone, must reduce their capacity to engage with parents, as does the desire to maintain a consistent experience in the nurture corner. These constraints must also apply to co-working with health visitors and third sector agencies during the staff time allocated for nurture work.

There are two further tensions. The focus on health and wellbeing in particular is understandable in the context of the work of nurture practitioners and the training they receive. Nevertheless, there seems to be a danger of polarising areas of development that are not necessarily in opposition and to encourage thinking about child development that runs counter to the typical holistic approach adopted in preschool settings which reconciles active learning with children's health and wellbeing.

The second risk is that the emphasis on identifying gaps or delay in development and deficits in children's behaviour can result in the over-use of some diagnostic labels such as 'on the spectrum' and 'selective mute'. On the other hand, an area of potential development which nurture corners seem well placed to promote is currently under-developed in the accounts of outcomes for children. The focus on the regulation of behaviour, turn-taking and co-operating with peers can be extended to examine the impact that nurture experience can have on developing positive dispositions to learn and beginning to acquire cognitive skills that mean that children are well-equipped for the ways of learning that will be expected of them in primary school.

This study and the available evidence have generated a number of recommendations for the further development of nurture provision in nursery settings.

- Support nurture practitioners to articulate the pedagogic practices that they are developing in the nursery context to allow these ways of working with children and their families to be shared and developed.
- Review methods for recording targets and progress and the evidence required so that best use can be made of the nurture practitioner's available time.
- Consider whether the resources and range of activities in nurture corners can be enhanced.
- Review expectations about engagement with parents and carers and develop models of practice and partnership with other agencies.
- Consider the lessons from nurture practices which can be applied in playrooms for all three to five year olds.
- Extend the number of practitioners with accredited nurture training to ensure that groups are not suspended due to staff absence or disrupted by staff turnover and increase the number of staff who can support interventions with parents.
- Ensure that health visitors and third sector staff working with nursery settings are given access to training in the principles and practice of nurture.
- Find ways to facilitate more collaborative working practices between staff in nurseries and health visitors.

 RESEARCH TEAM

The research was commissioned by the GCPH and Glasgow City Council Education Services, supported by a multi-agency advisory group. The research was conducted by a team led by Dr Christine Stephen at the University of Stirling's School of Education.

 FULL REPORT

The full report can be accessed via the GCPH website at www.gcph.co.uk. The report should be cited as follows: Stephen C, Stone K, Burgess C, Daniel B, Smith S. *Nurture corners in nurseries: exploring perspectives on nurture approaches in preschool provision in Glasgow*. Glasgow: GCPH; 2014.

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